



A VERY

IMPORTANT



DATE

With unparalleled access, *Empire* peers down the rabbit hole and into the mysterious, magical world of Tim Burton's *Alice In Wonderland*. Careful you don't get lost down there...

WORDS MARK SALISBURY

ALICE IN WONDERLAND



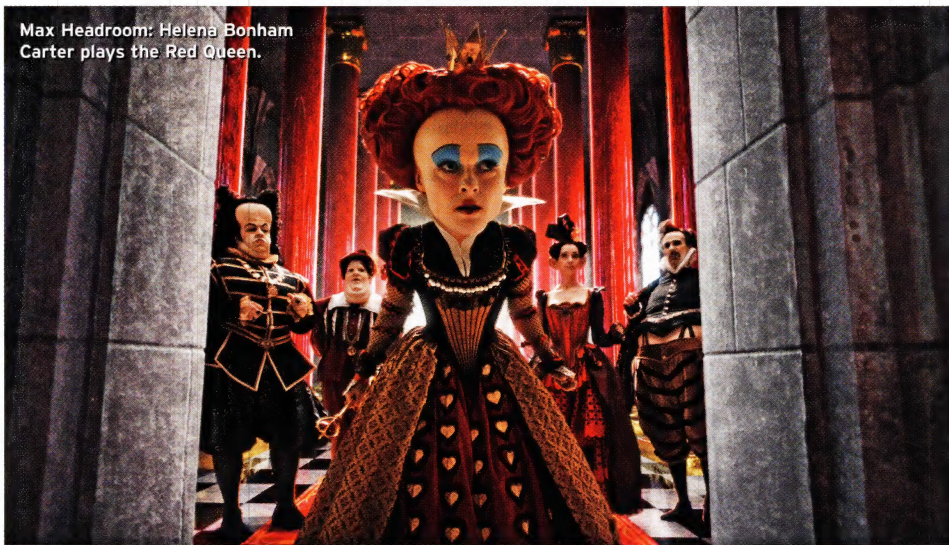
Plenty of 'shroom to move: Alice (Mia Wasikowska), flanked by Tweedledum and Tweedledee (Matt Lucas).

INSIDE STAGE 14 AT LOS ANGELES' CULVER CITY STUDIOS, ALL IS GREEN. GREEN WALLS. CEILING. FLOOR. EVEN ACTORS. TIM BURTON IS A DIRECTOR WHO FAVOURS STOP-

motion animation over CGI, who prefers to keep it real and build sets. So to be shooting the majority of his latest film, a 3-D version of Lewis Carroll's literature classic *Alice In Wonderland*, against green-screen then digitally adding sets and characters in post-production, represents a radical departure. "I did green-screen on *Sweeney Todd*, but it was a couple of days," says Burton. "This is the whole shoot. It's quite difficult because I've always relied on sets to help create the atmosphere of a scene. This is sort of backwards. You do the shot, then compose it later, in a weird way. That's a strange thing to me."

While Burton had initially considered filming *Alice* entirely using motion-capture à la *Beowulf*, he soon decided it wouldn't be the best way to utilise his actors. Little by little, he reintroduced live-action elements back into the mix. And so his *Wonderland* features real actors — Johnny Depp as the Mad Hatter, Helena Bonham Carter as the Red Queen, Anne Hathaway as the White Queen and Mia Wasikowska as Alice — some of whom will be digitally altered, as well as fully animated CG characters — among them, the White Rabbit, Dodo, March Hare, Dormouse and Jabberwocky. Then there are the hybrids — part motion-capture, part real actor — like Crispin Glover's Knave Of Hearts, or Tweedledee and Tweedledum, both of whom are played by *Little Britain* star Matt Lucas. "At first, they didn't know if we'd have costumes," laughs Bonham Carter, whose character is an amalgam of two of Carroll's creations, the Queen Of Hearts and the Red Queen. "They thought we might be in a green

Max Headroom: Helena Bonham Carter plays the Red Queen.



leotard, which would have been hideous. Then they graduated to a green Elizabethan outfit. And then we got the costume, which is so much better."

Today's scene is the only one in which Depp, Wasikowska, Bonham Carter, Hathaway and Lucas (who's dressed in a green motion-capture suit, trainers and hood that covers everything but his face) all appear together. Hathaway's character, younger sister to Bonham Carter's petulant, tyrannical monarch, and a twisted version of the typical fairytale princess, sits atop a gym horse-type contraption held aloft by men dressed all in green. Wasikowska, wearing a Joan Of Arc-style suit of armour, sits astride something similar, again carried by several green men. In the final film, both will be riding CG creatures, added in post-production along with the playing-card-based Red Army and chess piece-inspired White Army that line up on either

side of the chequered battlefield as Alice prepares to fight the fearsome Jabberwocky (voiced by Sir Christopher Lee).

For now, there's just a vast green space swallowing up the actors. And since there's very little for them to orientate themselves with, Burton, who has two video monitors before him — one displaying the live image, the other with a temporary background that roots the actors in some kind of environment — relays specific instructions via microphone, during each take.

"Jabberwocky!" he shouts, at the beginning of one.

The actors look up...

"Watching it," Burton continues.

... and imagine that a great beast is about to descend upon them.

Depp raises his sword. Takes aim at a creature that won't exist for many, many months. ▶



The masters and their mutt:
Tim Burton, Johnny Depp and friend.

ALICE IN WONDERLAND

"Here comes the TAIL..."

A crane, with a piece of canvas attached, swoops down towards him.

"Watch out... Stab the tail, Johnny... Nice. Big. Stab."

"I felt a little bit exposed doing that," admits Anne Hathaway, the following day, "but that's the fun thing about this, there is no one person who has to look foolish while everyone is playing it straight. Everyone's in the same boat, we're kind of naked up against this blank screen, and vulnerable to it. But everyone feels very safe because of Tim."

"It's like walking in a world where you don't know the language and your friend has to coach you along," says Johnny Depp of this particular brand of make-believe. "I don't know the language, but Tim does. If he tells me an emotion he wants, I can get there, because, in green-screen, you could be walking on the backs of giant pigs, with a crow sticking out of your ear. It could be anything. But he knows what's happening."

Does he? "Yes and no," Burton laughs. "You have to have an idea, but anybody that says they can completely see it in their head, I think, is mistaken. So I pretend like I know, and I do, to a degree."

Burton has 40 days to shoot the green-screen section of *Alice In Wonderland* — he filmed the real world scenes that bookend the movie earlier in the UK over two weeks — an inordinately speedy schedule given the complexity of the project. Plus, he's shooting *Alice* as he would a traditional film rather than a motion-capture movie. "I wanted to make the shoot quick," Burton explains, "so at least the actors could keep the energy going and make it feel like a movie."

Moreover, even though a large part of the appeal of directing *Alice* was, he says, the opportunity to make a movie in 3-D, Burton chose to shoot 2-D for convenience and speed, making the decision to transfer the movie into 3-D in post-production. "To be honest I didn't see the benefit of it," he says. "At least all the troubles I'd heard about doing it that way versus the conversion we're doing."

Working in green-land has been draining



A greenscreen-frazzled Burton (note the purple shades) throws helmer shapes for Mia Wasikowska.

on cast and crew. "It zaps your energy," Burton reflects. "You feel like a zombie." He has had special purple lenses fitted into his sunglasses to help diminish the green glare. "People have started to get ill. It's green-screen syndrome."

Even Depp, who, after the *Pirates Of The Caribbean* films, has plenty of experience with visual effects, is finding it hard. "I like an obstacle," he says, sitting in his trailer. "I don't mind having to spew dialogue while having to step over the dolly track while some guy is holding a card and I'm talking to a piece of tape. But the green itself is exhausting. It beats you up. You're kind of befuddled at the end of the day."

FIRST PUBLISHED IN 1865, *ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND*, WRITTEN BY CHARLES DODGSON UNDER THE NOM DE PLUME LEWIS

Carroll, was an immediate sensation, and would change the course of children's literature

forever. It was followed six years later by a sequel, *Through The Looking Glass, And What Alice Found There*, both of which have since proved to be the inspiration for countless stage, television and film adaptations, most famously Disney's much-loved 1951 cartoon version. "It's so much a part of the culture," says Burton. "Whether or not you know the story, you know certain images or have certain ideas about it. It somehow taps into that subconscious thing, that's why all those great stories stay around, because they tap into things people probably aren't even aware of on a conscious level. That's why there's been so many versions of it, it captures people's minds. There's even a book that has all the *Alice* references in popular culture. But as a movie, I've never seen a version I've really liked. They're always about a passive little girl wandering around a series of adventures with weird characters."

As scripted by Linda Woolverton (*Beauty And The Beast*), Burton's *Alice* has a three-act structure and more emotional context, revolving



Wonderland was created entirely in post-production.

BRIEFING

ALICE IN WONDERLAND

Released: March 4

Director: Tim Burton

Starring: Johnny Depp, Mia Wasikowska, Helena Bonham Carter, Anne Hathaway

Plot: A twist on Lewis Carroll's timeless children's book, *Alice* (Wasikowska) returns to Wonderland as a 19-year-old. After reuniting with friends such as Tweedledum and Tweedledee she sets about bringing to an end the Red Queen's (Bonham Carter) reign of terror while finding her own destiny.

around a teenage girl on the cusp of adulthood who has no memory of her having journeyed to Wonderland as a child. After the death of her father, Alice is drawn back to Wonderland, when the White Rabbit (voiced by Michael Sheen) appears to her during a garden party. "It's a very different story, a different Alice, but it has a lot of the same themes and characters," insists Wasikowska. "When we first meet her she's grieving and feels very isolated. She doesn't really fit into the society she's a part of, and doesn't like what's expected of her, to get married and be a good wife. She wants to go beyond that. So Alice going back to Wonderland is her rediscovering who she is."

Burton had been determined to cast an unknown as his Alice, despite many of Hollywood's leading ladies having their people call up to inquire about the part. In 18-year-old Australian Wasikowska, he found someone on the cusp of stardom, able to play child-like and yet convince as feisty, warrior woman, dressed in armour, wielding a sword and fighting a Jabberwocky. "We met a lot of people, but she had a quality that surprised me," says Burton of the young Canberra-raised actress, whose performance as a suicidal gymnast in the acclaimed HBO show *In Treatment* had put her on Hollywood's radar. "She had that certain kind of emotional toughness, standing her ground in a way which makes her kind of an older person but



with a younger person's mentality. You either have that or you don't."

Wasikowska had submitted a video to Burton's casting director, Susie Figgis, when she heard he was making *Alice*, and then found herself flying back and forth between London and Sydney several times over the course of a few weeks in early 2008 to audition in person. "I read the book when I was little and I read it again when I started auditioning," Wasikowska recalls. "It's the sort of book [*that*] every time you read it you get something else from. So it's constantly giving."

Burton has, of course, got form for taking a much-loved children's classic and putting his own, unique spin on it. And, let's face it, *Alice In*

Wonderland is perfect material for the filmmaker, with its surreal tone, absurdist humour, outsider heroine and twin worlds. "He's made it a bit more English again," reveals Matt Lucas. "It's a bloody tale now. I think if you're going to do it, you might as well do something different to what was done before, and we've seen very cutesy and very faithful adaptations. So it seems only right that this will be Tim Burton's *Alice In Wonderland*. This is very much his vision of it."

"There are certain things you feel were written for Tim," says Depp. "I felt the same on *Sweeney*. It was as if Sondheim wrote that waiting for this kid from Burbank to be old enough to knock it out. The book is incredibly >

"THE GREEN-SCREEN
IS EXHAUSTING.
IT BEATS YOU UP."
JOHNNY DEPP

ALICE IN WONDERLAND



On-set catering in Wonderland is exceptional.

dark and hallucinogenic. It's pretty apparent that when [Carroll] was writing [it] he was well under the influence of something other than sheer brilliance."

Burton's *Alice* promises to embrace the more bizarre, outlandish nature of Carroll's original stories, and there's a seam of darkness running through this Wonderland and its inhabitants that's very apparent. Depp's Hatter has bright orange hair and bushy eyebrows, a white painted face, and green eyes of differing size. For today's scene he's wearing a kilt and brandishing a broadsword, looking like some Looney Tunes version of Mel Gibson's character in *Braveheart*. When he began researching the role, Depp discovered the expression "mad as a hatter" derives from the mercury poisoning hatters suffered as a result of the millinery process. "I looked up mercury poisoning and its effects," he explains. "Sometimes there's a kind of a high, then an intense brooding, and then a rage, so there's almost this multiple personality disorder in a way. The colour orange came into play because of the mercury; it stained their hands. Then I thought, This guy's had way

too much of it."

Accordingly, Depp's Hatter has several distinct personalities and accents, including English and Glaswegian. "This incredibly fun and light nutball turns into this very dark force you don't want to get near," he says. "Something happens behind the eyes."

Ah yes, those eyes. On set, Depp wears green contacts that are so weird they alter his look completely, although his eyes will also be increased slightly in size in post. Bonham Carter's head, however, will be blown up to massive proportions, around three times normal size. "I have my own special camera that makes your head bigger," she laughs. "But Tim says my head looks big anyway." With her heart-shaped red wig, high hairline and trashy blue eyeliner that requires three hours in make-up each morning, her Red Queen is a demented version of Bette Davis's Elizabeth I. "It's a bald cap," she insists when *Empire* inquires as to whether she's had her hair cut. "It's certainly not shaven, because I do live with the director and he does want to have something attractive, vaguely, to come home to."

IN CHARGE OF ALICE IN WONDERLAND'S ELABORATE VISUAL EFFECTS IS KEN RALSTON, A FOUR-TIME OSCAR-WINNER AND FOUNDING MEMBER OF ILM, WHOSE

credits include *Star Wars*, *Back To The Future*, *Forrest Gump*, *Polar Express* and *Beowulf*. "I'm taking techniques I've done before and mixing them up in a way that I don't think has been done," he explains, standing in the next soundstage where the props for a flashback sequence are being readied. "And it's really because it's the best for the film. I'm always willing to try something impossible or semi-impossible. But because of what we're trying to pull off here and still get a lot of the actors' performances in it, this seemed like the way to go. It's a hodgepodge of a lot of bizarre technologies thrown into one, and a lot of these shots have everything I can imagine in them. If you're trying to decipher what the tricks are, you're never going to figure it, and that I thought was a really cool way to go."

Referred to as "The Guru", Ralston is on set every day to make sure everything runs smoothly



which, given the complexity involved in each shot, is no mean feat. "We're in the world of computers here," he laughs. "It is infinite the amount of things that can go wrong." A large part of Ralston's time during filming is spent dealing with issues of scale. "Alice keeps changing her size, which is a huge pain in the ass," he continues. "There are other factors too, because we're shooting it so quick. This is a 40-day schedule to shoot this huge film, so I'm trying to combine a lot of shots. Whereas [normally] you'd break them up into pieces, I'm saying, 'Put them all in there and we'll figure out how to make it work.' And most of the time it's been working out. I'm trying to keep it all straight in my head, so six months from now I still know what's going on."

A YEAR LATER, TIM BURTON IS IN NEW YORK FOR THE OPENING OF HIS EXHIBITION AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART (MOMA) THAT COLLABATES

his paintings, drawings and photographs. In a meeting room overlooking MoMA's central courtyard that temporarily houses topiaries from

Edward Scissorhands, Burton appears a little tense. The post-production process has been slow and exacting. "Obviously there are some shots that are done, but the bulk of it gets unloaded at the end, so Danny [Elfman]'s scoring to green-screen," he details. "It's all going to work out. But I feel like that scene where they're playing chicken in *Rebel Without A Cause*. You get in a car and you just go and see what happens. The problem is it's all in the computer. It's not like a stop-motion; you can't touch it. It's frustrating to me."

While the MoMA show has seemingly proved a welcome distraction, soon it'll be time to return to Wonderland. "I was going to do another movie in between," says Burton with a wry smile, referring to his and Depp's next collaboration, *Dark Shadows*. (They had originally planned to shoot while *Alice* was in post, and will now film later this year.) "That is the scariest thing in the whole universe. Thinking about that just makes me realise I am completely insane."

➤ *Alice In Wonderland* is out on March 4 and will be reviewed next issue.

CHILD'S PLAY

➤ Four more visually mindblowing children's adaptations...



THE WIZ (1978) Based on the Broadway musical based on *The Wizard Of Oz*, the jive-turkey stroll along the Yellow Brick Road boasts many brain-searing images, from creepy subway pillars to funky monkeys and Michael Jackson's scarecrow.



THE CAT IN THE HAT (2003) Everyone claims to hate Mike Myers's über-hyper Seuss rendition, but your mind's eye still can't scratch out the neon bubblegum wonderland that brought a picturebook to stunning, full-tilt life. Hats off.



LEMONY SNICKET'S A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS (2004) Criminally under-rated, this extremely tactile version of an esoteric fairytale is founded upon costumes and sets which sneer at SFX with vivid surrealism.



WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE (2009) With the source material revered and light on words, Spike Jonze's realisation of a bedtime oddity is a melancholy paradise of giant angsty muppets, kooky constructions and gritty rough'n'tumble.

IT WAS DEEP IN THE MIDDLE OF A NIGHT SHOOT WHEN THE RESPONSIBILITY OF STARRING IN

A Single Man, the directorial debut of fashion guru Tom Ford, finally hit home with Colin Firth.

"I remember getting a bit rattled, feeling overworked and wanting to go home," he says. "And it was in that precise moment it really hit me, how much I was being trusted here. Tom's loved this story for the last 30 years and so much of it was on my shoulders. It was a wake-up moment really, of just feeling gratitude for it."

Since his big-screen debut in 1984's *Another Country*, Firth has been an integral part of huge-grossing movies — the *Bridget Jones* brace (\$543 million), *Mamma*

Mia! (\$609 million!) — but nothing in his film career has generated the interest and excitement currently coursing around him for *A Single Man*. It offers Firth a rare chance to play a lead role ("I tend to work in the area of character acting, which is often more interesting. It's partly my age"), it's a real change of image from the period finery of costume dramas and the cosiness of Richard Curtis jumpers, and it has already brought home the top acting prize from Venice, an important precursor to awards success.

"I am very fortunate to be working as continually as I have," levels Firth, dressed down today in jeans-and-jumper mode before donning a (Tom Ford) suit for *Empire*'s photo-shoot. "But the danger of that is you need more and more stimuli to keep you fresh. So something so unusual as this was quite bracing, really, and certainly worth thinking about. Other people's responses were interesting. Some people thought it was a very cool prospect and other people were, 'Be careful, what's that all about? Is it just something out of the fashion world?'"

As it turns out, *A Single Man*, based on Christopher Isherwood's novel, is about as far from the frippery of fashion as you can get. Firth plays George Falconer, a fiftysomething British

TAKING THE LEAD

With a rare lead role in a powerful drama, the one-time Mr. Darcy has unexpectedly found himself an Oscar frontrunner. Not bad for someone who used to be "convinced that awards were bad for my profession"...

WORDS IAN FREER PORTRAIT MATT HOLYOAK

academic living in '60s Los Angeles, struggling to come to terms with the death of his partner of 16 years (Matthew Goode) in a horrific car crash. The action, if you can call it that, follows George in a single day during which he dwells on his past and contemplates if he wants a future.

"There is something very beautiful about this portrait of loneliness. George has made a very conscious and, in his own mind, perfectly rational decision that there is no point in tomorrow. Why live? What gives it its beauty — you can't put any aesthetic value on raw grief and loneliness by itself — is the fact that there is a dignity and wryness about the way he conducts himself."

As you can see, Firth is smart and serious about his craft and, unlike many actors, will genuinely consider and respond to a question rather than trot out some answer devised by his publicist. To help him find George, Firth drew sustenance from the set ("When you're going to sit by yourself at the table in this exposed glass house, you don't need a director to say, 'You're really lonely right now'"), his wardrobe ("His suit and tie are expressions of desperation. He would fall apart if his shoes weren't shined properly") and, most importantly, by being completely in sync with his director.

"[Tom] set a mood, an atmosphere," says Firth. "I think it was satisfying, not being a particularly demonstrative actor, to have a director who comes in and pays attention to what I do. It's no good being subtle and nuanced in a distant wide shot in the back of the room. You need someone to come to you a bit."

As such, Firth's skilful, subtle, heartbreaking performance is a million miles from a typical award-winning turn: there are no grandstanding speeches, histrionic breakdowns or temper tantrums. Yet look at any Oscar blog, and Firth is a firm favourite to be up for 2010 acting honours.

"I'm quite old," the 49-year-old emphasises when confronted with the idea that he might be an awards frontrunner. "It's

nice that people respond to it positively enough to talk like that, but I think if you start buying into it... I just wouldn't know, really. I used to be quite militant about awards. I got a nomination for something when I was young and I resolutely didn't go to the ceremony. I was absolutely convinced that awards were bad for my profession, that it shouldn't be a sport, a competition where you shouldn't set actors against each other, so I went to France instead. I didn't win it and I was shocked that I was shocked. I invested something in it I didn't know I had. When I heard it had gone to someone else, I was a bit stricken. It was a real moment about finding out something about yourself."

Despite this unexpected discovery of a competitive streak, the overriding sense is that come March 7, Firth will be happy whatever name is read out of the golden envelope.

"When we were in Venice and people responded the way they did, I remember thinking, It doesn't get any better than this, this is great. It was such a warm reception. Moments come and go, and if you bank the good ones, it doesn't really matter what happens down the road."

➤ *A Single Man* is out on February 25 and is reviewed on page 40.

"THERE IS SOMETHING VERY BEAUTIFUL ABOUT THIS PORTRAIT OF LONELINESS... THERE'S A DIGNITY AND WRYNESS."